

Starmer's Mandelson/Epstein crisis deepened by Olly Robbins' testimony

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The crisis engulfing the UK Labour government and Prime Minister Keir Starmer over his appointment of Peter Mandelson as Ambassador to Washington deepened Tuesday.

Starmer handed Mandelson the job in December 2024 fully aware of his intimate connections with the billionaire child sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. He was forced to remove him following revelations last September which showed that Mandelson sent supportive messages even as Epstein faced jail for sex offences.

Starmer's chief of staff Morgan McSweeney resigned in February this year to take the heat off the prime minister, after it emerged that Mandelson had passed market-sensitive information to Epstein while serving as a trade envoy in Gordon Brown's Labour government.

But an investigation by the *Guardian* last week found that on January 28, 2025, the UK Security Vetting Service informed the Foreign Office that risk factors involving Mandelson meant his clearance should be denied.

Despite this, the Foreign Office—under direct pressure from Downing Street, as evidence proves—insisted that Mandelson still be appointed to the critical post of dealing with the incoming Trump administration.

Starmer found another scapegoat, this time Sir Olly Robbins, permanent secretary at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and head of the diplomatic service, who was sacked four days ago and blamed for not informing Starmer of Mandelson failing vetting.

Starmer was forced to make a statement in Parliament Monday, maintaining that he was not made aware until Tuesday last week that Mandelson had failed his high-level “developed vetting” because he had been “deliberately” kept in the dark. It was “incredible” that Robbins had failed to alert him or other government officials that the vetting found Mandelson not suitable for the Washington appointment, Starmer told Parliament.

But Robbins does not intend to be Starmer's latest fall guy. Reportedly considering legal action over his dismissal, he gave his own statements to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on Tuesday.

Laying waste to Starmer's story that no-one told him anything about what was going on, Robbins explained that the Foreign Office had to insist, *against* a hostile Downing Street, that Mandelson go through security vetting.

“There was... a debate between Cabinet Office, FCDO, about how to make sure that he is sent out to post with the appropriate clearance and that took several days, and a position taken from the Cabinet Office was that there was no need to vet Mandelson,” Robbins said.

“The risks attending his appointment were well known and had been made clear to the prime minister before appointment. In the end, the FCDO insisted and put its foot down.”

Robbins said that when he took up his post in the Foreign Office, the decision to appoint Mandelson had already been announced by Starmer and there was “constant pressure” to get Mandelson to Washington. There was a “strong expectation” from Downing Street that Mandelson “needed to be in post and in America as quickly as humanly possible”.

Asked by the committee chair and Labour MP, Emily Thornberry, where the pressure was coming from, Robbins replied that the “vector” he was “most conscious of” was “No 10's private office”. Asked if the source of the pressure was Starmer's chief of staff McSweeney, Robbins refused to confirm.

He was asked about a Sky News report that McSweeney phoned Philip Barton, Robbins' predecessor as permanent secretary of the Foreign Office, asking him to speed up vetting approval, and reportedly telling Barton, “Just fucking approve it.”

Robbins responded that the word he got from Barton

was a “strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness [from Downing Street] about this process”.

Starmer is badly wounded. He remains in office thanks to the near universal backing of Labour MPs.

The Parliamentary Labour Party is the only body which can affect his removal as prime minister, because of the government’s unassailable majority. They have at this stage decided not to move against him because the damage resulting from his being brought down on this issue could not be confined to Starmer.

The widely discussed intention is that, with Labour expected to lose the local elections by a landslide in May—currently sitting fourth place in the polls—this could be used to engineer a leadership transition.

This, it is hoped, would maintain the “stability” demanded by the capitalist class after over a decade of political and social turmoil under four different Conservative prime ministers, especially important at a time of acute difficulty for British imperialism centred on the breakdown of relations with the White House.

Starmer was given a fairly easy ride by his own MPs following his statement on Monday. The most spineless performance was put up by the dwindling rump of the official Labour “left”, who function as a servile loyal opposition.

Addressing Starmer as a fellow member of the Privy Council—a select group of the political and legal establishment which advises the monarch—Jeremy Corbyn’s former shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, said that “Many on the Labour benches” would “appreciate my right honourable and learned friend’s apology today, but many of us remain bewildered about why the appointment took place, despite the warnings that many of us gave him.”

McDonnell’s stated concern was that this “has damaged the party that I have been a member of for 50 years.” His answer was to call on Starmer to “take steps to clear this toxic culture out of our party”.

Corbyn, now expelled and the leader of Your Party (though still listing himself as an Independent), asked only why Starmer did not answer a feeble question from Diane Abbott, who has had the Labour whip withdrawn twice by Starmer and has little chance of being readmitted to the party under him.

Corbyn’s main intervention so far in the Mandelson/Epstein crisis was his call in February, after McSweeney’s resignation, for “the fullest possible inquiry into all of this”—a call reiterated by McDonnell on

Monday. Corbyn said at the time that this should be open to the public only “for the most part,” letting everyone in ruling circles know that he too opposes the airing of any revelations that might undermine the “national security” of British imperialism.

Zarah Sultana—whose role is to capture left-wing sentiment with the use of more radical rhetoric than Corbyn—is alone in listing herself as a Your Party MP. She was removed from Parliament by the Speaker for denouncing Starmer as “a barefaced liar.”

The same treatment was given to Lee Anderson of the far-right Reform UK, who also called Starmer a liar. Reform have benefited most from the widespread hatred of the Starmer government because of the systematic efforts of Corbyn, McDonnell and their ilk to suppress the opposition of millions of workers and youth to Labour for its enabling of genocide, pro-business policies and the xenophobic scapegoating of migrants—on which Reform UK depends for its own rising fortunes.

The events of the last days are a salutary lesson for the working class. They expose the hollowed-out, diseased body politic—serving the selfish interests of a grasping capitalist oligarchy—which has spawned the likes of Mandelson. Yet, despite widespread public revulsion, it is the likes of Nigel Farage and Lee Anderson who are left to crow.

Only the upsurge of the class struggle that will come from the radicalising impact of the Iran war, as the ruling elite imposes ever greater austerity on the working class, enforced by savage repression and attacks on democratic rights, can change this situation. Only the building of a genuine socialist party can give workers the alternative to Starmer’s rotten government they want and need.



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